

From *Tales of Gorm* in the

LEGENDS OF ULM

BOOK IV

THE
STARSTONE

BY

GRACE CHETWIN

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*for Briony
with love*

To make magic, Gorn, really great magic, you need knowledge, and the power of mind and will. A great wizard collects many tools, and develops the strength to wield them.

—Harga the Brown



CHAPTER ONE



GOM LAY ON HIS BACK, LISTENING. HE was not alone. He could feel the other presence probing the darkness, searching. . . . A speck of light sparked above his head. He blinked, and looked again. The light flared, then condensed to form a ghostly skull that floated, hollow sockets fixed upon him.

“Katak!”

As Gom spoke the name, cold touched his fingertips, crawled through his hand, and up his arm. Katak’s deathsleep! He reached for his wizard mother’s rune to ward it off—not there, of course. Move, Gom urged himself. Move, while you can, before you freeze entirely! He tried to sit up, but couldn’t. He tried to call out, but his lips were clamped. Fear rushed through, a burst of hot panic, unlocking his paralysis. . . .

Gom sat up in bed, his heart pounding. He raised his eyes apprehensively to the darkness above. Nothing. Yet moments before, that pale skull, the form in which the alien shapechanger usually appeared, had hovered over him, and its evil cold had crawled up his arm, and into his

chest, toward his heart.

Katak, Spohr: shape-changer. *Here?*

Gom raised his left hand, felt its icy coldness.

His eyes adjusting to the night dark, Gom looked about the walls of his tiny bedchamber, thinking of the deep place under the Sound, where he and the sea serpent Ganasz had trapped Katak and shut him away with the Spohr's own seal-spell. Had Katak somehow gotten free of the kundalara and found Gom out?

Agh! Gom crossed his arms over his chest, rubbing his ribs in brisk dismissal. Hadn't Harga reassured him that Katak would stay safely put? And hadn't Ganasz guaranteed it? This had been but a nightmare. Hadn't his last waking thought been of the Spohr? As for the numbed hand—Gom leaned down, felt the floor. There! His arm had been dangling over the side of his cot, his fingers resting on the flagstone. But yet . . . Gom hugged himself again, rocking back and forth. Those dark sockets, that empty stare . . .

Down in the cavern under the Northern Sound, as Gom had crouched in the protective coils of Ganasz's tail, that same cold had stolen over the pair of them. And had it not been for Harga's rune, they might be there still.

Fear increased. Freed, would Katak really seek him out? That other time, Katak had sought the rune that Gom's mother, Harga the Brown, had left with him on the day of his birth. But Harga had it back, so that couldn't draw the evil one.

Gom wasn't entirely comforted.

He reached up to the bedrail for the belt his wizard mother had given him, and opened the pouch. His fingers encountered a small silver ring. More than ring: it was key, a magic key to Harga's domain. Nudging it aside, Gom took out a pendant, a small crystal with a tiny gold flake embedded within it—another gift from Harga at their parting. This crystal was nowhere near as powerful as her rune, for that stone had accumulated so much magic over many years. But Katak might yet come after it. The Spohr sought gems of all kinds, whether invested with magic or not, hadn't Ganasz said?

"If Katak is after magic, why does he want your treasure?"

"Because . . . from precious gold and silver and priceless gemstones is much magic made. . . ."

Katak was going to need a great deal of magical power to fulfill his aim on Ulm. Ah! Gom shook his head. He was giving himself far too much importance! There were many gemstones in the world of much greater value than Gom's crystal! Precious jewels belonging to the rich; runestones belonging to the Hierarchy. Katak would be far more interested in them, Gom told himself, but he was still not reassured. What if the Spohr sought revenge for Gom's shutting him away? It might be wise to keep that dream in mind.

A bang on the door made him jump. "Ho, boy! Only one hour to dawn and there's much to do before then! Up, up and stir yourself!"

Folgan.

Gom stuffed the crystal back in his pouch, not daring to wear it in the wizard's company, then he tumbled out of bed, and pulled on his clothes. His new wizard master was calling him out to begin the first official day of his apprenticeship. Gom slipped through into the kitchen to find the man fully dressed and waiting.

At the sight of the wizard standing there in a dean gray gown, with long gray locks and beard neatly brushed, Gom felt crumpled and shabby, even scruffy. He was aware of his own travelworn shirt and breeches, his dusty boots, hastily tied. He had not washed as yet, of course, and his dark brown hair stuck out in dumps all over. He pulled himself up to his full height—which was not much, raked his tangled mop back with his fingers, and faced his new master square on.

"Humph. Asleep, eh? On your first night here?"

"No, sir. I wasn't," Gom began, but Folgan was off and running through a well-worn homily which he wasn't about to change on Gom's account.

"In my day, apprentices never slept the first night. They were excited, eager to start work." Folgan pulled on his beard, looked down at Gom from under his brows. "But times have changed, and things aren't as they used to be. Oh, well." He thrust a sheet of paper under Gom's nose. "Your

list of early chores. Hurry, or we'll be eating our breakfast at dinner!"

"But—" Gom stared down, dismayed. "I—I can't read, sir."

"Can't—" The wizard frowned. "Harga the Brown's son, unable to read?"

Gom opened his mouth to protest, closed it again. Harga had not had chance to teach him anything, but he couldn't say so, couldn't say a word about his mother's business, not to this man, not to anyone.

"Makes me wonder, boy, why she was so anxious to get rid of you, to foist you onto some other mage. Oh, well, I suppose now you're here, you might as well get on." Folgan raised the list to read it out. "Remember each thing, for I'll say it only once: first you'll feed and let out the horses. Then fetch up logs from the pile by the door, and water from the spring down the mountainside. You might clean yourself up while you're at it—you look a disgrace! After you come back, you'll stir the fire and make breakfast—and be quick about it. When it's ready, you'll summon me from my workroom with this." The wizard reached down a small brass bell from the mantelshelf.

At mention of the wizard's workroom, Gom's interest perked up. "Where do I find the workroom, sir?"

"You don't, boy" Folgan shook to the bell. "Just stand in the doorway there and ring the thing I'll hear, I assure you. Now get moving, the day's already half gone."

It was still not yet light when Gom carried fresh hay into the horses' warm cave. Stormfleet greeted him sleepily. "How goes it?"

"Oh, wonderful," Gom grumbled. "Folgan is all kindness, don't you know?" He thought with longing of The Jolly Fisherman back in Penlangoth. Of Essie the landlady, who would now be bustling about the kitchen, preparing breakfast for her customers. Of his friend Carrick the master tinker lying in the attic room he'd shared with Gom: a low, comfortable chamber with wide view of the lake. Gom had felt so welcome there.

"Never mind," Stormfleet said. "Better than nothing. Just think: if you hadn't been so quick-witted, you'd not be anywhere."

True. Gom patted the cito's flank gratefully. "You'll be all right?"

Stormfleet tossed his mane. "Right as rain," he said. "Hevron says we have the run of the place. When Folgan's not traveling, we may come and go as we please. As soon as it's light, Hevron is going to show me around."

"Oh, really?" Gom said. "I'm very happy for you."

"You don't look it."

Gom wasn't, much. Not fair, that he should be penned up while Stormfleet roamed the mountainside at will! And yet—that was a bit selfish. And perhaps unwise. Back in Pen'langoth, when the shoe had been on the other foot, Stormfleet had gotten very restless cooped up in Essie's stable. If the wild colt had not found his brief stay in that inn stall to his liking, how was he going to take a seven-year stint in this lonely mountain hole? Still. "You're born of the plains. You don't like this kind of territory, remember?"

"Ah," Stormfleet said. "That was then. I'm a seasoned traveler now."

"Seasoned traveler, indeed." Gom was not impressed. "Only yesterday, while we were climbing up here, you almost fell in a couple of places. In fact, that last time I thought you'd refuse to move another step."

"I was tired," Stormfleet said. "That's all."

"No, that's not all." Gom ran his hand over Stormfleet's sagging spine, sadly remembering the once-wide and slippery back, black glossy coat, long legs, the tell-tale silver ringmark on the brow. Who would guess that this sorry-looking old nag, with his knock-knees, dull gray coat, and yellowed rheumy eyes, was that proud, immortal cíto? Such was the disguise Harga the Brown had laid on Stormfleet at the cíto's own request to protect him from those who sought him, especially the Yul Kinta. Although Stormfleet could move better than one might think, he still lacked his real strength and grace and balance. Dangerous, for Stormfleet to roam those tricky slopes in his present state.

Stormfleet arched his neck. "I can see exactly what you're thinking, Gom Gobblechuck. Rest assured I'll watch my step."

"Please do," Gom said, and made to say more, but bit his tongue. His friend, wild and proud, and a cíto into the bargain, didn't take kindly to advice and admonitions.

"You're a regular bag of fret, aren't you?" Hevron blew gently on Gom's cheek. "I promise you I'll watch where Stormfleet sets his hooves. I'm not about to lose welcome company. And anyway," the roan added, "a cíto is immortal, is it not?"

Gom looked from Hevron to Stormfleet in alarm. "Immortality's not proof against a broken neck, Hevron!"

"Oh, don't fuss so!" Stormfleet stamped a foot. "I'll be fine!"

"If you must worry"—Hevron butted Gom's shoulder—"look to yourself: get back upstairs, before my master comes to fetch you!"

Gom put his arms about Stormfleet's neck. "Enjoy yourself," he murmured. Turning about, he took up some three, four logs, and hauled them inside, all the way up to the kitchen, his thoughts churning. What if Stormfleet should get stuck? What if he should fall? Gom almost ran back down to beg the colt to reconsider. But there'd be no point. *Seven years!* Stormfleet had to learn to go afield—and Gom must let him!



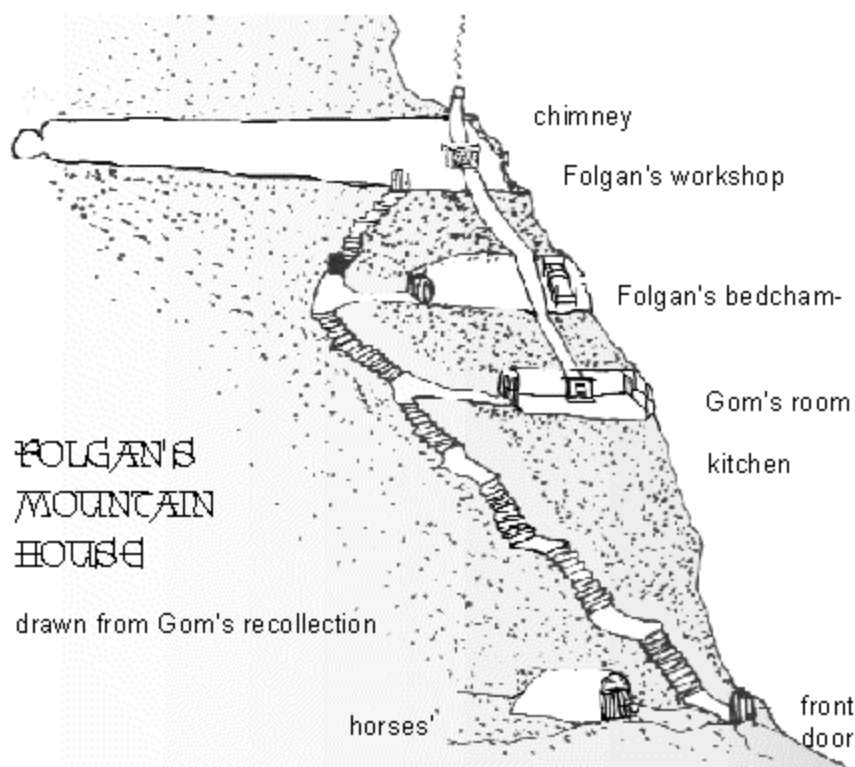
Folgan was grumpy at breakfast, and in no mood for talk. But when he'd finished his toast and tea, and filled a fat, black briar from a baccy barrel on the mantelshelf, and lit it with a taper from the fire, the wizard did show Gom the rest of the house.

It reminded Gom of Harga's, for both were hollowed out under stone. In both, the front hall was the lowest level and the workshop, the top. But in between, Harga's living space ran horizontally under a lake island bluff, making three levels in all; while Folgan's chambers were stacked one above the other almost vertically under granite rock-face for full four. From Folgan's entrance hall, way above—one hundred or more steps above—was the kitchen. Gom's tiny room, a converted larder, lay back of it on the other side of the chimney. Above the kitchen, up another flight of steep, uneven steps, was Folgan's bedchamber. In it was a wide four-poster bed that Gom was to make each day, and a washstand with a wide blue bowl that Gom was to fill every morning with hot water. Beside that

stood a highdaddy crammed with clothes that Gom was to keep washed and darned for Folgan.

Over that chamber was the top and final level: Folgan's workshop, but Gom did not see it that day. It was barred by a stout oak door across the bottom stair—which would remained barred, Folgan said, until Gom had mastered his letters and numbers. Gom tried not to let that bother him. After all, if he worked hard, it shouldn't take long, a week or two, perhaps. Then Folgan would have to let him up that stair to begin his real work at last.

All morning, Gom obeyed Folgan's orders faithfully. For elevenses, he made a hot vegetable broth with buttered crusts toasted at the hearth. And he set a table fit for the Lake Lord himself. But if Folgan was



pleased, he didn't say so. The wizard only complained that the broth was not salty enough, and that the toast was soggy.

Not true! Gom took a slice and snapped it in half. Really, the man's eyes were everywhere looking for complaint! Gom washed the dishes fast, eager for his first writing lesson. But he spent the afternoon washing the dirty clothes from Folgan's traveling pack, with no sign of letter or number. Gom tried not to mind. After all, the wizard had been away from home for several weeks. He must have some catching up to do.

That night, Gom lay in his cot, looking through his narrow window. The deep sky was salted with stars. But he'd not find the one where Harga was. The Seven Realms were strung like a bright necklace across the far side of Ulm, over the southern seas. Gom took the crystal from his pouch.

If at any time the stone should flash, close your hand about it, and you'll stand once more by the crystal stair. Alamar. If you should be asleep, or otherwise engaged, the gold flake will call you with a waking dream. . . ."

Mother.

If only the crystal would summon him to her! Any moment, perhaps the very next one, she might call him to meet her, face to face. Not for real, though. Gom sighed. Only *alamar*. Only his mind would travel, while his body remained locked in deep unconsciousness in Folgan's mountain house. And yet it would be better than nothing, as, *alamar*, he climbed the glassy stair to speak with her in the bright beam of the Tamarith, wondrous pillar of living crystal, shining starstone of enormous power.

Loneliness settled over him, cold as the air in his room.

When, Mother? When?

It could be long. Whole days on Ulm were as moments among the stars, though Harga couldn't explain why. Yawning, Gom stowed away his crystal and lay down on his narrow cot. It was certainly was firm! He thought of his friend Mat—*former* friend Mat. He pictured Mat lying in idle comfort in Bokar Riffik's house, having an easy time at Gom's expense. The last time he'd seen Mat, Gom had been on his way to meet his new master, Bokar Riffik. Mat had tricked Gom, sending him away

from the meeting on an errand. By the time Gom had finally returned, Bokar Riffik had gone—with Mat in Gom's place. And Gom had been left for Mat's intended master, Folgan. Just wait until he met Mat again—Gom would tell him a thing or two! Gom turned over, dismissing Mat from his thoughts. His mind drifted. He took to thinking of the dream he'd had the night before, of the death's-head shining in the dark.

Katak. Spohr. Evil entity from an alien star.

Gom grew apprehensive now. When he fell asleep, would the skull reappear? The very idea jolted him wide awake again. He opened his eyes, saw the solid shape of his staff leaning against the foot rail, the outlines of the mountain creatures coiling up around the stock, the little wooden sparrow poised on top as though to fly. His father, Stig, had carved it as walking stick just before he died. Gom's staff now, it had been with him on all his travels, comforted him, given him courage, and saved him from many a disaster. Like that first time, when, only days out of Windy Mountain, Katak had attacked him in the shape of a skull-bird. That staff had saved Gom's life. His face softening, he recalled lying down to sleep in the bear cave. Then, the sparrow had magically come to life, had spoken with Harga's voice. Back in the Dunderfosse, Gom had offered to give his mother the staff as a memento of Stig, but to his great relief, she had declined. Keep it, she'd said. It will make a fine wizard's staff one day.

Harga. If only they could meet now. She'd reassure him. And he'd tell her in turn, Don't worry about me. I'm with Folgan, as you wanted—(no need to say how that had come about)—and I'm working to become the wizard we need me to be, a match for Katak, for sure.

Agh, Gom looked upward defiantly. A dream, that's all it had been. An ordinary nightmare. So . . . He lowered his gaze. How come he still felt uneasy? Gom tossed and tossed about, but couldn't shake the fear. What if Katak had gotten out of his northern prison somehow?

The idea had been for Harga to teach Gom magic, make him a wizard like her so that together they could guard against the Spohr, keep Katak from destroying Ulm. But Harga had been drawn away against her will, and Gom was left alone without any magic, without the least idea what to

do should he come face to face with Katak. He could see himself now, standing by the crystal stair, the death's-head hovering before him—on the very threshold of the star-gate: *what would he do?* Gom shook his head into the pillow. In his mind's eye, he saw Ulm, itself a small bright star in the sky. And he saw himself racing to catch it before it fell into the reach of Katak's grasp.